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# Dialogue, Critique and Creativity – some questions for the profession

by Richard Lemmey

Imagine the scene. You are sitting by a slipway on a sunny summers afternoon where a centre is running canoe rafting sessions for primary aged school children. There are three groups with three instructors and you can't help eavesdropping. By the end of the afternoon three comments are stuck in your head.

Instructor A: *'That's good, I have never thought of doing that before.'*

Instructor B: *'I know that's really heavy. So let's take a rest for a minute.'*

Instructor C: *'Andy doesn't have ideas, does he.'* Helper: *'Oh, he's a bit 'special'. Is he?'* (laughs from group).

Small splinters of dialogue. How we speak is important and each exchange illustrates one facet of why. Such exchanges are crucial to helping our clients develop through what we do.

At the moment the economic pendulum is swinging against outdoor education as part of the curriculum as it periodically does at time of cuts. To counter this trend we need to explain better what we do as practitioners **and** do it better. There is little research evidence to demonstrate why outdoor education is effective and much of our rhetoric is vague and generalised in terms of people's development. Whilst we, especially in this magazine, understand each other, we are largely preaching to the converted. To explain better and be better, I would suggest that there is a need to really drill down to what specifically we can provide and also practice.

We need to provide and practice  
**EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE**  
**EFFECTIVE CRITIQUE**  
**EFFECTIVE CREATIVITY**

In any practice, whether it's raft building, running a centre or writing a policy, the essence of the process is identifying an issue or dissonance, critiquing it, engaging in dialogue and being creative in our decisions. The essential life skills of observation, thinking, speaking and decision making. These are not abstract issues when related to our practice.

These three dimensions can be considered in the three contexts of 'US' as a profession, 'I' as the practitioner and 'THEM' as the learners.

## 'US' as a profession

Established professions have defined bodies of knowledge and ongoing dialogue about knowledge, practice and the contentious issues that arise; they also have open forums where this takes place. There is a higher level of thoughtful conversation – dialogue – which is obvious in the letters pages of their professional journals. Where is our 'letters page'?

Such dialogue also takes place between the profession and the wider world where what we can offer and what is needed are discussed. How much has our practice changed over the last 10 or 20 years relative to the needs of our clients and how do we know?

Self-critique of the profession and our practice is not immediately obvious. In my previous role, when applicants for posts were interviewed the 'what was your closest call' question was often the most telling. Often we learn from things going wrong but do we share this learning?

Professional creativity is definitely out there, but how do our organisations encourage it within their own practice and how creative are we in meeting others' needs?

## The 'I' as a practitioner

How conscious am I as a practitioner of my dialogue with clients and colleagues? Do I choose what I say from instinct or do I have a more sophisticated understanding of the different types of dialogue relative to different situations? Evidence from other professions shows that such understanding can increase group effectiveness, task completion and personal efficacy to a marked level, to the extent that training and investment are focused specifically upon the area of dialogue.

As a practitioner how do I see critique? Is it a threat or a positive contribution? Is the critique that we use instinctive, from experience, critique or are we aware of different types of formal critique and error identification. Such formal critique takes us away from right and wrong and the personalisation which we find so uncomfortable. Having developed our reflexive practice in this way, could we then develop it as skills in our clients?

Such a development of dialogue and critique leads to some expectation of creative change to our practice and some sort of responsibility and agency to effect that change. How conscious are we of this responsibility



*Self-critique of the profession and our practice is not immediately obvious.*



as individuals and how empowered are we by organisations to be creative and likewise to what degree do we allow our clients to develop their creativity?

## 'The 'Them' as Learners'

Very often introducing people to an environment or an activity is really worthwhile in itself, but within this there are many opportunities for learners to talk, comment and problem-solve. If, by consciously building on these, we can enhance their experience and these skills, we can also demonstrate more clearly to sponsors the benefits of the work we do. Be it in relation to spoken English in the national curriculum, improved communication and groupwork for apprentices or heightened critical awareness in students, there are many ways in which we design experiences to give these aspects more emphasis.

## Do we practice what we preach?

For those early in their careers these may seem somewhat abstract issues but for the more established practitioner they are important for the development

of the 'I' of themselves, the 'us' of the profession and the 'them' of the learners.

We traditionally have espoused the benefits of self-reliance, groupwork, environmental awareness, adventure and risk-taking but I would challenge as to what degree we are practicing as well as preaching. Now there's a contentious issue for a professional dialogue!

It is worth considering how our everyday unguarded dialogue can be gendered, oppressive and anti-environmental and how easy it is to regard this as trivial - 'Oh, come on!' - but 'special' Andy is a real person, the smallest in the group (and who then withdrew from it.)

In real terms many of us may be working or living in situations where the management is autocratic and all resistance is futile, but in the same way as our profession reflects current national and global circumstances we must resist those influences that counter what we believe. We must acknowledge that other professions are investing much in training for dialogue, critique and creativity and if we wish to develop into a more sophisticated profession we should perhaps start moving in these directions. This sort of evolution, must by definition involve change, which brings in effect the chain of dissonance, critique, dialogue and creativity.

In subsequent articles I hope to expand in detail upon these three themes. In the meantime.....' Hey Guys, its Tuesday so let's go Ghyll-bashing!' ■



### Author's Notes

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**Photographs** from the author, except sailing image from Peter Barnes.